Michael Green: Why I oppose Donald Trump

Michael Green worked for President George W. Bush on the staff of the National Security Council (NSC) during 2001-05, eventually becoming special assistant to the president for national security affairs with responsibility for East Asia and South Asia. He was one of 50 former security officials in Republican administrations who signed a letter on August 8 saying that Donald Trump “lacks the character, values and experience” to be President and “would put at risk our country’s national security and well-being.” Then, on August 8, he was one of eight former Republican administration security officials dealing with Asia who went even further and endorsed Hillary Clinton.

Q: Why did you endorse Clinton?

Green: In a Clinton versus Trump contest there is no question who should win if you are a conservative internationalist—and I saw a protest vote for a third candidate as a cop-out. So I hope Clinton wins, but also saw a protest vote for a third candidate as a cop-out. So I hope Clinton wins, but also rather than Trump. I thought he was more of a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. He is a conservative internationalist. 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to crises, will remain very dangerous.

Q: I looked at the President’s legal power to do unilateral things on trade, and a President has quite a lot. So, I think he could do a tremendous amount of damage.

Green: On trade, the President has enormous authorities under Section 301 of US trade law, the National Security provisions, and so forth, to impose sanctions and do other things. But, at the end of the day, the Congress will pass laws and the Congress controls the budget. It would be chaos. But in the end, it would be very hard for him.

Q: All sorts of Americans traveling abroad, even tourists, keep getting asked by people in Japan, Europe and so forth: “How could this have happened in the first place?”

Green: It is unprecedented, and nobody really knows exactly why it happened. One narrative that seems compelling is that, “People are distressed because wages are flat for the middle class.” But there is a lot of academic research and exit poll analysis that shows that economics are not the main reason people support Trump. So, it has to have an economic component, but that doesn’t seem to be the whole story.

Another explanation is, “There has always been a level of nativism and even racism in American politics. And it’s exploding now because of social change.” But actually, illegal immigration is down the past few years. And so that doesn’t fully explain it.

Obviously, things like the fracturing of media and the gerrymandering of election districts contribute because these factors allow people to only hear news that validates their ideological point of view.

People who resent the “elites” and “political correctness” and want to say things that are a little bit racist or misogynistic and want to blame others for their own failures find in Trump validation for their desire to speak in a manner that was considered too crude before Trump came along.

I went to Kenyon College in Ohio, which was a conservative kind of liberal arts college. And a lot of my classmates, who are doctors or small businessmen, were all for Trump three months ago, but now they are all walking away from him. Trump is losing support among college-educated white males. On the other hand, he still does fine with whites with less college education.

Q: Historically, when people are frustrated economically, “identity politics” around social issues like abortion or gay marriage or immigration or nationalism becomes very important. The average Trump voter in the primaries had a higher level of income than supporters of his rivals. But, among many of such people, there is the “fear of falling.” Those who have something to lose hold on even tighter to their social identity and they blame “them” (Muslims, immigrants, African-Americans, etc.) for their threatened loss of status.

Green: I agree. The people I know in Ohio who are supporting Trump are quite successful. But they are also very anxious about their kids’ ability to succeed or how to avoid “falling.” These people are scared about their ability to hold onto their economic and social status.

This is not unique to the United States. The Brexit vote, a lot of what you are seeing in Europe, nationalism in Japan, Korea and China all similarly emanate from issues of identity and status anxiety. And in fact, the US is better conditioned to have a check against authoritarianism in our constitutional system than some of these other countries. But, given America’s role in the world, it is uniquely consequential when this happens in the US.

One dimension ignored by the media is that Republican voters don’t like losing. And they believe in American “exceptionalism,” American strength and American leadership. Trump has told them that, “We are losers, but, under me, we are going to win again.” That same frustration is what elected Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

Q: Neither Reagan nor either Bush wanted to withdraw from the world, as Trump does. Trump almost seems like a throwback to the isolationism of 1930s-40s Republicans and the accusation of “treason” spouted by Senator Joe McCarthy in the early 1950s. This is not leadership; it’s withdrawal.

Green: I agree. But my point is that there is a lot of the frustration with what Republicans and conservatives see as eight years of Barack Obama getting kicked around by the Chinese, by the North Koreans, the Iranians, and ISIS. The current frustration is not that different from that addressed by past Republican Presidents. But this time, the voters are pouring their frustration into a nativist, unilateralist, and reckless character.

Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush failed to captivate the public with the Reagan-like expression of American strength. Trump just knocked them off their game. The debates were decisive. Trump’s whole career was based on a business model where you come out swinging and you just throw the other guy off by being unprincipled and crude. And that made him look stronger than Rubio or Bush.

So, if Trump loses, which seems likely, there is an opportunity for a new Republican leadership to try to capture that mood among the party’s base. Trump is tapping into something that’s very, very old in conservative and Republican circles in the US. And he is doing it in the most ugly and angry way, which is a sickness. But there is room for a kind of robust, muscular internationalism to find a good candidate. Trump sort of hijacked that mood.

The initial media attacks on Trump were not convincing to conservatives because they had been told by the New York Times and similar media outlets that, “Reagan is a B-movie actor,” and that “Bush is a country bumpkin.” That’s why it will have an impact that Republican experts in the national security and foreign policy fields coming out and saying, “Take it from us, this guy is worse than just being a fool; he’s dangerous.” It is noteworthy that not a single national security official from previous Republican administrations has risen in his defense.

Q: Why, aside from former White House
chief economist Greg Mankiw, don’t we see
similar letters from prominent Republican
economists?
Green: On the national security picture,
especially on Asia, Hillary Clinton was quite
an effective and good Secretary of State. Her
views are not that different from
Republicans on the Armed Services and
Foreign Affairs Committees, especially on
Asia. She made mistakes, but she demon-
strated a competence and an instinct for
American interests that is just completely
missing from Trump. On the economic side,
however, her proposals have moved to the
left of where the mainstream Democratic
Party used to be. Trump’s economic policy is
just completely unrealistic. But, a lot of peo-
ple who have been signing the National
Security letters are not joining the Clinton
campaign, in part because she is opposing
people like the governor of Virginia, or sen-
or other anti-TPP
Primary campaign was the two candidates
ideas. What you heard from the Democratic
party is just not workable. Sometimes it takes a
decade or two, but such leaders do emerge.

Q: I’ve met a number of pro-TPP people
who are convinced that Clinton secretly
wants TPP to pass—in order to provide a
counterweight to China—but she doesn’t
want to be blamed for it by her voter base.
So, they contend that, during the “lame
duck” session, she would very quietly signal
to her Democratic allies in Congress not to
oppose holding a lame duck vote to ratify
TPP. I believe this is wishful thinking.
What’s your assessment?
Green: Initially, she tried to keep her
options open. Then, when Trump won the
nomination, she and her political advisors
decided, “There is no halfway on this. You
have to be for it or against it, and we have got
to say she is against it.” So when you had
people like the governor of Virginia, or sen-
or foreign policy advisors around her speak
out in favor of TPP, they were publicly or
privately shut down.

What the policy advisors in the cam-
paign say is: “She is going to do a complete
review that will be very strategic and take
into account the voices that want her to get
TPP done.” It’s completely unconvincing.
Fortunately, she has not said she would
“renegotiate” it. The many internationalists
around her are holding out hope that she
would get some changes via “side letters,”
that don’t require changing the approved text
of the agreement itself. Frankly, Obama
probably should have done some side letters
to get this through Congress in the first
place. The problem is: will she be able to
attract somebody good to be US Trade
Representative (USTR) after this presiden-
tial campaign?

People around her say it’ll be less than
a year before she’ll get around to reviewing
TPP. There will be a lot of pressure on her
from the Sanders people and other anti-TPP
Democrats, especially if the Democrats
retake the Senate.

Q: I imagine that her economic and political
advisors would be almost forced to tell her
not to spend her political capital on TPP. She
will already come in as the least-liked
President in modern history. So, why start
off by doing something many of her support-
ers will see as a betrayal of a promise? While
there are certainly benefits from an interna-
tional reason to do TPP, its impact for good
or ill on the US economy is minuscule. She
would get much more political and econom-
ic benefit by, for example, fixing the prob-
lems of Obamacare.

Green: On the economy, you are right. However, in terms of foreign policy and
strategy in Asia, not passing TPP would be a
huge self-inflicted wound.

Q: That’s the dilemma.
Green: And so a lot of her people privately
think she’ll turn to TPP right away. I think
it’s going to be a year or two. And it would
be much, much better for her on TPP if the
Republicans keep the Senate. She gets along
well with the members of the Republican
House and the Senate.

Q: My fear is that, merely by capturing the
Republican nomination, he has done incred-
ible damage to the Republican Party and to
the mindset of tens of millions of Americans.
This will have permanent effects on how pol-
itics works in the US even if, as seems like-
ly, Trump will lose. It will further crimp
America’s willingness and ability to play the
role of “benign hegemon” in the world.
What’s your view?
Green: It depends on the election outcome.
The worst case scenario is that Trump wins.
The best case scenario comes about if Trump
just collapses. In the latter case, there would
be some bruises to the political system, but
also opportunities to restore confidence in
the US. The Republican Senators, especially
the new generation, are very internationalist.
They are much more engaged on national
security than their Democratic counterparts,
one big exception being [Vice Presidential
candidate] Tim Kaine. Republican
Governors are much more internationalist
than Democrats. So I think there is a real
base of leaders of internationalist leadership
in the Republican Party.

What worries me more is if Trump
loses, but it’s close. In that case, he could
take out a “rigged election,” and
fueling more and more resentment. And then
he gives out all of these “dog whistles” about
gun violence and race. That would be a lega-
cy that would be incredibly damaging for the
fabric of our society and our image abroad.

Q: Would it also send a message to
Republicans in Congress who are worried
about being defeated by even more conserv-
ative opponents in their primary elections?
Green: Yes, exactly. If Trump crumbles,
then it’s less of a concern.

We are going through a much larger
transition in American politics. And it has to
do with the postwar social safety net policies
not keeping up with globalization, with
aging, and with the atomization of our soci-
ety because of technology. Trump is one par-
cularly bad symptom of this transition.

In the short term, we are seeing, as
some analysts put it, a Republican Party
committing suicide. But, in the longer term,
there are a lot of dynamic ideas for growth
and dynamism in the economy coming out
of the Congress and think-tanks that Trump
has nothing to do with. By contrast, the
Democratic Party doesn’t have any new
ideas. What you heard from the Democratic
primary campaign was the two candidates
trying to outdo each other in pandering to
unions, and more public sector spending,
and so on. These ideas are just not workable.
So, even if Clinton wins, as expected, I still
think the Democratic Party is going to have
its own conflagration coming up.

In political science, we always look at
both structural factors and the emergence of
this or that individual personality. A lot of
what is happening today is due to structural
change. But I am a real believer in leader-
ship, and I do think both parties will gener-
at leaders as they have in the past, people
like Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan,
people who understand the spirit of the
times, understand how to make the needed
structural changes, and can capture an elec-
toral mandate based on that. I am still opti-
mistic that leadership will emerge.
Sometimes it takes a decade or two, but such
leaders do emerge.